

Professional Heights

BY JO CRAVEN, MA '97, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF JOURNALISM • PHOTOS BY ROB HILL

WHAT WAS INTERESTING ABOUT the 1995 FBI homicide report was what was missing.

The Supplemental Homicide Report is but one computer database in the FBI's annual release of the nation's Uniform Crime Reports. In all its detailed information on U.S. homicides, the 1995 data (released in 1996) lacked even a single record coded "81"—the flag for justifiable homicide by a police officer.

Tracking down that omission led to a Pulitzer Prize-winning series that appeared in *The Washington Post* in November 1998. The five-day series revealed that, in the 1990s, Washington, D.C., police shot and killed more people per resident than any other big-city police department in the country—including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit and New Orleans.

Although many shootings by D.C. police were courageous, the details of some were chilling. For instance, an attorney sitting in his car during rush hour saw a man hopping alongside another car aiming a 9mm pistol through the side window. The armed man was a District police officer. Moments later, he had shot and killed the driver of the car, an unarmed 16-year-old, who was wanted

A PULITZER PRIZE WINNER
TELLS HOW A HUNCH SHE HAD
AS A STUDENT LED TO WINNING
JOURNALISM'S MOST
PRESTIGIOUS AWARD.

for taking his parents' car, driving recklessly and running red lights. The officer said the boy had tried to run over him. Witnesses, including the attorney who saw the shooting, disputed this.

Other disturbing patterns emerged as *The Post* investigation unfolded. Several factors appeared to contribute to D.C.'s shooting record: an influx of police cadets in 1989 and 1990 had overwhelmed the training academy; the department replaced its revolvers with a semiautomatic handgun with a sensitive trigger; many officers had not requalified to use their service weapons; and the department's system for tracking officer-involved shootings was faulty, as were procedures for investigating these shootings.

But before delving into these issues, there was the question of the FBI records.

SNIFFING OUT THE STORY

The absence of "81s" suggested that whole records were missing from the Supplemental Homicide Report, and the FBI's own documentation supported this hypothesis. The computer records were accompanied by a paper document that described how many records were in the government's computer vs. how many records the government had given to me. These two numbers should have matched, but they didn't: I was short 287 records.

Several conversations with the FBI revealed that the bureau did collect justifiable homicides but that the records were not part of the Standard Data Release. So, I ordered a nonstandard release, specifically requesting the justifiable homicides.

Six weeks later, the data arrived. I eagerly opened the database and looked for records coded "81." There was none. Despite a very specific written request,

MU faculty member Jo Craven graduated from the J-School, won a Pulitzer Prize while at The Washington Post, and has now returned to teach. She stands in the rotunda of Lee Hills Hall. Although the means of getting information at The Post have some new wrinkles since the days of Woodward and Bernstein, a reporter's drive to uncover the truth has remained the most important.



which had been reinforced with several telephone conversations, the FBI had sent the standard release, which lacked the justifiable homicides.

I reordered the data and reiterated the request. More weeks passed. When the new records arrived, I opened the database, and there they were: hundreds of records coded "81."

A STARTING POINT

The raw numbers of justifiable homicides by police officers alone were remarkable. Only officers in a handful of cities—all much larger than Washington, D.C.—had shot and killed more people. But ultimately, these records served only as a starting point.

The Post eventually assembled a team of reporters and editors who for eight months investigated the use of deadly force by D.C. police.

In addition to me, the team included investigative reporters Jeff Leen, MA '82, and David Jackson; metro reporter Sari

With a little persistence from Jo Craven, the FBI handed The Post some data tapes that raised some intriguing questions. Craven and colleagues turned the information into an award-winning series during eight months of thorough research and analysis of justifiable-homicide police records from across the country.

Horwitz; director of computer-assisted reporting Ira Chinoy; investigative editors Rick Atkinson and Marilyn Thompson; and researchers Margot Williams and Alice Crites.

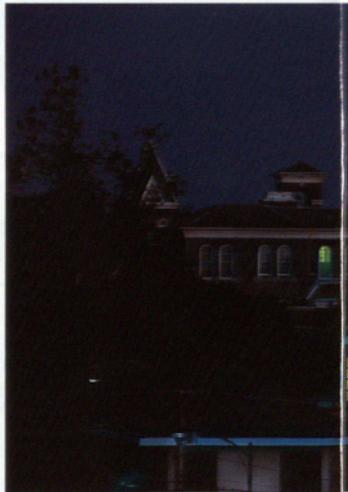
Together, we pored over hundreds of lawsuits and other records, piecing together what had happened in Washington, examining the results and looking for explanations. Individually, we worked in our own area of expertise.

BECOMING AN EXPERT

As a master's student at the Missouri School of Journalism, I concentrated on computer-assisted reporting while working at the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, which is headquartered at the University. And it was here that I first noticed that records might be missing from the FBI data. After graduating in 1997, I went to work in the computer-assisted reporting unit of *The Post* and followed up on my hunch.

As our investigative team grew, I focused more and more on verifying our belief that D.C. police had killed more people per resident than any other big-city police department. We concentrated

on the 27 cities with at least 500,000 residents at any time between 1990 and 1996, the latest year that U.S. Census popula-

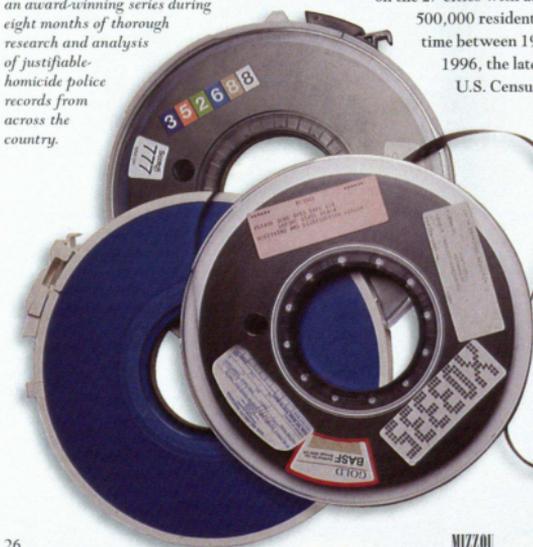


The dome of Lee Hills Hall shines as a beacon for journalists everywhere. The School of Journalism houses the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, where Jo Craven trained as a master's student.

tions were then available. We contacted these departments directly and collected from them the number of fatal shootings and woundings by each department's officers from 1990 to 1997.

After consulting criminologists and reading literature on the subject, we also decided that no single measure was adequate to gauge a department's number of officer-involved shootings. We decided instead to measure fatal shootings against five categories: population, violent crime, arrests for violent crime, homicide and the number of uniformed police officers.

By each of these measures, the number of fatal shootings by District officers was higher than average, and usually it was significantly higher.





THE RESULT

While collecting national data, the team also mined local computer and paper records, including a report that outlined the circumstances leading to each shooting by a D.C. police officer; lawsuits against the District, the Metropolitan Police Department or its officers that involved a shooting; and, as we expanded our investigation, allegations of police brutality.

Finally, we mapped the local data, which provided a startling picture of the volume and location of fatal shootings and woundings in the District. Among other things, the series determined that the following elements contributed to D.C. police's shooting record: In 1989 and 1990, in order to avoid losing federal funds, the department hired a record 1,500 new officers. The department has since acknowledged that those recruits were poorly screened. They also were poorly trained: The academy, which had been increasing the amount of firearms training, began cutting it in response to the deluge of recruits.

Around the same time, the department

gave up revolvers in favor of the 9 mm, semiautomatic Glock 17, which fires more easily than most handguns. In about nine seconds, it can shoot 18 bullets—the full magazine plus one bullet in the chamber. Although the department required that officers requalify with their service weapons every six months, 75 percent of the officers involved in shootings had not complied. Some were years overdue for retraining.

Police investigations for officer-involved shootings were poorly documented, they were filled with errors or omissions, and they could drag on for years. In one instance, critical ballistics tests were not performed until five months after an officer fatally shot an 18-year-old armed man. A witness said the officer had stood over the prone man and fired at point-blank range. The ballistics tests eventually confirmed that the officer had shot the man twice in the head at a distance of 18 to 24 inches. The shooting was ruled justified.

The department's system for tracking officer-involved shootings was faulty. Every such shooting is supposed to be documented and evaluated by the department's Use of Service Weapon Review Board to determine whether the shooting was justified. Seven fatal shootings were missing entirely from the board's records and therefore had never been reviewed. Seven other fatal shootings had been mislabeled.

As a result of our investigation, the Washington, D.C., police chief asked the Justice Department to review his department's shootings; he toughened the service weapon requalifying rule insisting that officers meet the requirement; and he changed the way officer-involved shootings are investigated.

In April, the series won the 1999 Pulitzer Public Service Medal. It was the first time *The Post* had won the Public Service Medal since Watergate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jo Craven has taught computer-assisted reporting at MU's School of Journalism since May.

A PECK OF PULITZER PRIZES

The Pulitzer Prize Board awards honors in 22 categories, 14 of which are for journalism. Some winners, like Craven, use computer-assisted reporting and other innovative news-gathering techniques. Others rely on good old-fashioned gumshoe reporting. To ferret out voter fraud in Miami, for example, reporter **Karen Branch**, AB, BJ '86, went into the city one night to meet a source. Someone stole her car before she even walked off the lot, but Branch got her scoop.

"Technologies have changed drastically, but the principles of journalism—accuracy, fairness, thoroughness—are the same as when Walter Williams taught," says Dean Mills, journalism school dean and a two-time Pulitzer Prize juror.

By combining the time-honored Missouri method of training journalists with the latest news-tech trends, MU graduates have done well at the Pulitzer Prizes again this year. In addition to **Craven's** and **Leen's** win, as chronicled at left, the winners are:

Branch is a reporter for the *Miami Herald*, which won the Investigative Reporting award for its coverage of voter fraud. **Marty Petty**, BJ '75, is publisher of the *Hartford Courant*, which won the Breaking News Reporting award for its coverage of a state-lottery worker's shooting rampage. **Stephen Savoia**, MA '79, is a photographer for the Associated Press, which won the Feature Photography award for its coverage of the presidential scandal involving Monica Lewinsky. **Sally Stapleton**, BJ '80, MA '97, is an international photo editor for the Associated Press, which won the Spot News Photography award for its coverage of the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. **Ken Wells**, MA '77, edited Angelo B. Henderson's winning Feature Writing entry, which ran in the *Wall Street Journal*. ❁